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SUBJECT: SURPRISING MESSAGE FROM THE PRO-SYRIAN CAMP:  
LAHOUD TO GO, AND SINIORA'S PRETTY GOOD AFTER ALL

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

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**¶1.** (C) In a 8/1 meeting with the Ambassador, former Minister Wadih al-Khazen -- close to both Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and Maronite Patriarch Sfeir -- insisted that Emile Lahoud will leave the presidency on schedule on November 24. Khazen also made a surprising proposition: if the USG wants Lebanon's parliament to elect a March 14-aligned president, then we should help broker a deal by which PM Fouad Siniora returns to head the post-election cabinet. The Syrians will relax about the presidency if they know that Siniora will be PM rather than the rash, inexperienced Saad Hariri. The Ambassador expressed skepticism, given the energetic attempts by Syria's Lebanese allies to destroy Siniora's reputation and government. Khazen responded that Syria, at last recognizing the need for improved relations with Lebanon, sees a new president with Siniora as appropriate interlocutors.

**¶2.** (C) Curiously, in what we thought at the time was a throwaway comment, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri told the Ambassador a few days earlier that Siniora, whose existence Berri prefers to ignore, was the best PM Lebanon has ever had. But we do not believe that Syria and its adulterous Lebanese allies are suddenly desirous of a summer fling with Siniora. Instead, we suspect that the pro-Syrians hope to use us to create destructive dissension inside the Hariri bloc, to promote distrust between Hariri (who does not hide his ambition to be PM this autumn) and Siniora. The pro-Syrians may also wish that we start to suspect Siniora of unspoken ties to the Syrian regime. End summary and comment.

LAHOUD TO LEAVE ON SCHEDULE

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**¶3.** (C) The invariably impeccably coifed Wadih al-Khazen (who enjoyed one of the shorter ministerial reigns in Lebanon's history -- joining Omar Karami's "made-in-Damascus" 2004-5 cabinet as Minister of Tourism only ten days before Karami resigned, toppling the cabinet, due to mass public revulsion after Rafiq Hariri's murder) asked to see the Ambassador "with an important message." Coming to the Embassy on 8/1, Khazen -- personal friends of both Emile Lahoud and Maronite Patriarch Sfeir -- opened with a gentle admonishment that, just become some Lebanese political figures might envision different ways of "protecting Lebanon" than the USG would prefer, the USG should not dismiss them as

traitors. Moreover, just because someone is a personal friend of someone the USG is boycotting, the USG should not assume that the views of that someone correspond fully with those of his boycotted friend. Trying to show some openness to the March 14 point of view, Khazen reminded the Ambassador that his sister Shadia is married to March 14 MP and an-Nahar publisher Ghassan Tueni.

¶4. (C) Moving to business, Khazen said that he had a brief message from the President of the Republic: Lahoud recognizes that there is no possible constitutional interpretation that would allow him to remain in Baabda Palace "a minute passed midnight" on November 24. Lahoud will exit the presidency on time, come what may. "Do not believe" the rumors that Lahoud will find an excuse to cling tenuously to office after November 24.

MARCH 14 PRESIDENCY: NOT IMPOSSIBLE  
IF SINIORA -- NOT SAAD -- COMES BACK AS PM

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¶5. (C) Noting he had a second message, Khazen said that it would not be impossible to have a president from within the March 14 ranks, as long as that president would not adopt a "confrontational" approach to Syria. The Ambassador responded that, to the best of our knowledge, all of the presidential candidates want an excellent relationship with Syria, but one based on mutual respect of each country's sovereignty and the acceptance of non-interference in the internal affairs of the other. "Exactly," Khazen responded, insisting (despite evidence to the contrary provided by the Ambassador) that Syria has finally accepted that it must establish normal, positive diplomatic channels with Lebanon.

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¶6. (C) But for Syria to relax about the presidency, Syria needed reassurances that the Lebanese PM, too, would not be confrontational. If the USG could help assemble a package including the name of the prime minister to be appointed after presidential elections (as the start of a new presidential term forces the formation of a new cabinet), then Syria will more readily stand aside as Lebanon's parliament elects a March 14 president. Specifically, Khazen said, Syria will be more comfortable if Fouad Siniora returns as PM rather than yield the office to Saad Hariri, who wants it.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador expressed astonishment and skepticism. Syria and its Lebanese allies have attempted to undermine Siniora and his cabinet since 2005, working with particular gusto to topple Siniora since November 2006. And now we are supposed to believe that, not only does Syria want Siniora, but by getting a promise of Siniora, then the presidency can go toward March 14? Admitting that it sounded strange, Khazen said that is exactly what he has learned from credible contacts. The point is that the Syrians do not trust someone as inexperienced and rash as Saad Hariri. Siniora, the devil that they know, is solid, steady, and predictable. The bad relationship now is based on current politics that will change with the new president.

7, (C) Moreover, Khazen continued (returning to an earlier theme), Syria has finally recognized that it cannot have the control over Lebanon it had previously. Syria believes that it can remain influential in Lebanon but will need to rely on normal diplomatic activities to do so. In recognizing that it must turn over a new leaf with Lebanon, Syria sees the need for credible interlocutors, and having Siniora on board with a new president will help. The Ambassador noted that the Lebanese parliament, not the USG, has the power to select both the president (through elections in the parliament) and the prime minister (through binding consultations). Syria would thus be well advised simply to allow the Lebanese parliament to do its job.

COMMENT

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18. (C) What's going on here? Since Fouad Siniora was sworn into office in July 2005, Syria and its allies have concentrated on undermining his credibility and authority. After the Shia ministerial walk-out in November 2006, the anti-Siniora attacks grew in ferocity and viciousness. Now, in a one-on-one conversation with the Ambassador a couple of days ago, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri made a comment that, at the time, we thought was a throwaway line to disarm us. Lamenting that politics and constitutional niceties interrupted his relationship with Siniora, Berri described Siniora as the best Prime Minister Lebanon has ever had. And Khazen, one of Emile Lahoud's childhood friends, hints that he is carrying Syrian messages in claiming that it will be easier to get a March 14 president if we can guarantee that Siniora will come back to head the cabinet against post-elections. A "two-fer" for us, if Khazen is to be believed.

19. (C) In our view, having a March 14 president combined with a Fouad Siniora premiership would be a superb line-up in terms of strengthening the Lebanese state, Lebanese democracy, and Lebanese independence. While we defer to Embassy Damascus for an analysis of Syria's goals, we expect Syrian objectives are quite different. Khazen appeared sincere in his delivery, but we expect the underlying purpose of his message (even if obscure to the dapper but dim messenger) was not benevolent. Thinking over the surprising conversation, we suspect that Syria's friends in Lebanon hope to enlist our unwitting help in splitting the Hariri house between those who will back Saad Hariri as the heir apparent for the premiership (especially as Saad has made his wishes to become PM known) and those who prefer to stick with Siniora. They may also hope that, in the process, we start to wonder whether Siniora might harbor secret connections to Damascus. In any case, we chalk up our surprising and pleasant enough conversation to another one of those only-in-Lebanon experiences.

FELTMAN